

A wooden mask with a large, oval face. The mask is painted with various colors: red, blue, black, and yellow. It has large, circular eye holes and a wide, open mouth. Several feathers are attached to the top and sides of the mask. The background is dark and textured.

NEW ACQUISITIONS

SPRING 2024

JACARANDA



# JACARANDA

ART AND ANTIQUES FROM AFRICA, OCEANIA AND THE AMERICAS

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# NEW ACQUISITIONS

SPRING 2024

We are pleased to present our catalog *New Acquisitions – Spring 2024*.

Our online exhibition comprises 21 pieces from around the world. A highlight is a sensitively painted, overmodeled Iatmul skull reliquary, one of the finest to come to the market in recent years. Also included is a superb Ipiutak ceremonial spoon, an object of exceptional rarity.

Other highlights from Alaska are a fine pair of snow goggles, a beautifully engraved bag handle depicting scenes of Eskimo life in the mid-19th century and a rare Shaman's

mask with an articulated jaw.

From Africa, we have a large Lulua figure ex Merton Simpson, a fine Ifa bowl bearer, and two objects from the Jay Leff collection: a ceremonial spoon and a Baule female figure.

We are always excited by the discovery of new objects from various cultures and hope you will enjoy this eclectic selection.

*Dori & Daniel Rootenberg*

NEW YORK CITY, MAY 2024







# FIGURATIVE SPOON POLOH

DAN, IVORY COAST

Late 19th/early 20th century

Wood, metal

Height: 18 in, 45 cm

## PROVENANCE

Aaron Furman, New York (acquired pre-1967)

Jay Leff (1925–2000), Uniontown, PA

Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York, 'Important African, Oceanic, and Pre-Columbian Art, Property of Jay C. Leff', October 1975.

Private New York City collection, acquired in 1975 and thence by descent to the present owner.

## EXHIBITION HISTORY

Morgantown, WV, USA: University of West Virginia, Creative Arts Center, March 1969.

Pittsburgh, PA, USA: 'The Art of Black Africa, Collection of Jay C. Leff', Carnegie Institute, 24 October 1969 – 18 January 1970

Artists in Dan communities of Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire have mastered the art of carving impressive wooden ladles that are virtuoso works of sculpture. These ceremonial ladles, known as *wunkirmian* or *wakemia* (which translates as 'spoon associated with feasts') are badges of prestige, acknowledging an individual woman for her incomparable generosity. They are not so much utilitarian objects as symbols of status and the bearer of spiritual powers. Quality of craftsmanship and complexity of design are constitutive of the work's importance. To create such esteemed objects, Dan sculptors often relied on anthropomorphic forms and drew upon elements of style developed in other carvings

such as masks and figures.

Emblematic of honor and status, *wunkirmian* are the possession of the *wunkirle* or *wakede*, 'at feasts.' A title of great distinction, it is given to the most hospitable woman of a village quarter. One woman in each village quarter is honored with the title of *wunkirle*. When a *wunkirle* becomes old she chooses her successor from among the young women of her quarter and passes down her *wunkirmian*. With the honor comes a lot of responsibility—the *wunkirle* must be of a generous disposition, gladly offering her hospitality to anyone at any time, organizing and providing for important meals, and feeding travelers. To



be able to afford this largess, the *wunkirle* must be successful and industrious, and a well-accomplished farmer.

One of the *wunkirle*'s responsibilities is preparing the large feast that accompanies masquerade ceremonies. The excellent farming abilities, organizational talents, and culinary skills of the *wunkirle* are called upon to properly welcome and celebrate the masquerade spirits. When a woman has been selected as the main hostess of such a feast, she parades through town carrying the large ladle as an emblem of her status. She is followed by a line of women from her quarter, each carrying a pot of cooked rice or soup. With help from her numerous assistants (usually female relatives or friends), she distributes grains

and coins to the children of the community while dancing and singing. The event creates a profound visual analogy that honors the hostess, and women in general, as a source of food and life.

In addition to being emblems of honor, *wunkirmian* also hold spiritual power. They are a Dan woman's chief liaison with the power of the spirit world and a symbol of that connection. Among the Dan, the *wunkirmian* have been assigned a role among women that is comparable to that which masks serve among the men. As are masks, each *wunkirmian* is given an individual name. When a new *wunkirmian* is carved to replace an old one, sacrifices are made to empower it.



















## STANDING FEMALE FIGURE *BLOLO BLA*

BAULE, IVORY COAST

Late 19th/early 20th century

Wood

Height: 15 in, 39 cm

### PROVENANCE

Aaron Furman, New York (acquired pre-1967)

Jay Leff (1925 – 2000) Uniontown, PA

Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York, 'Important African, Oceanic, and Pre-Columbian Art, Property of Jay C. Leff', 10/11 October 1975.

Private New York City collection

### EXHIBITION HISTORY

Morgantown, WV, USA: University of West Virginia, Creative Arts Center, March 1969.

Pittsburgh, PA, USA: 'The Art of Black Africa, Collection of Jay C. Leff', Carnegie Institute, 24 October 1969-18 January 1970

Numbering about one million at the turn of the twentieth century, the Baule form part of the Akan group and occupy a part of the eastern Ivory Coast that is both forest and savanna. Some of the first African sculpture sought out by European collectors was produced by the Baule. The representation of exotic details, such as hairstyle, scarification pattern and the serenity of expression appealed to European taste. Moderation, balance, and positioning are significant aesthetic criteria for the Baule, idealizing the human figure.

Standing on a circular base, this female figure appears to be a Baule Spirit Spouse, or *Blolo Bla* and has been designed

with great care and attention. Patterns of raised scarification marks and full breasts are cultural indicators of beauty and signify ability for childbirth. In Baule culture, large calf muscles have been acknowledged as a sign of beauty, as well as well-placed feet with straight toes. The downward-looking eyes demonstrate a sense of privacy. Generally portrayed in a standing position of formal calmness with arms close to the body, attention is focused upon the head with emphasis given to detailed face, neck scarification and elaborate coiffures, known as a Baule Tre, a typical tripartite arrangement.

The scarification on this figure appears on the face, the front and back of the neck, breasts, and stomach. The mouth projects forwards and the hands rest on the stomach around the protruding navel, which is a sign of grace and peace. This gesture of hands on the navel has great meaning for the Baule, as the same gesture is made by certain spirits to show their respect or deference when they meet humans. The navel or 'kotoa' is the symbol for life and when protruding indicates a carnal link.

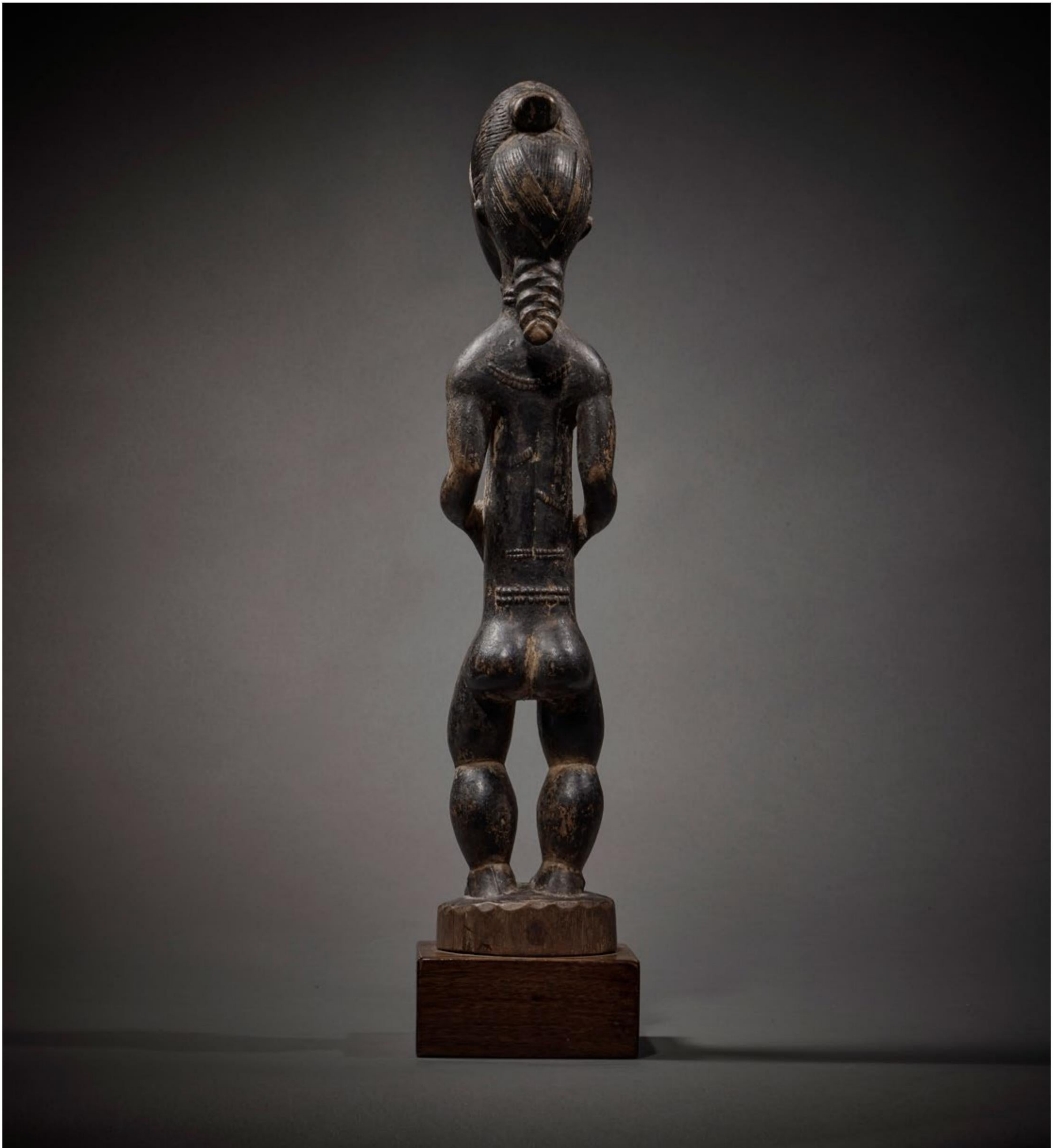






















## MINIATURE MASK

DAN, LIBERIA

Early 20th century

Wood, seeds

Height: 3 ¾ in, 9 ½ cm

### PROVENANCE

Loed van Bussel, Amsterdam

Michel Thieme, Amsterdam.

Most Dan face masks and those of the culturally related groups of Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia, are commonly executed in a miniature form, ranging in height between six and twenty centimeters. Even the largest miniatures are too small to be worn in front of the face, and they rarely exhibit any means by which they may be attached to anything.

Miniature masks bear many names: the most common is *ma go* (small head). Echoing the variety of names, they fulfill a variety of functions. Anyone who has a spiritual connection with a mask, or whose family owns an important mask, is entitled to commission a miniature. Rubbed with oil and food, they are wrapped up and kept on the owner's body or among his possessions and function as portable and personal forms that share the power and protective force of the full-sized mask. Miniature masks are carved to embody tutelary spirits and serve as testimony to the presence of the spirit associated with a large masquerade. When a mask-owner is traveling, the miniature mask serves as an important means of identification outside his immediate community. This role may have given it the commonly applied name of 'passport mask.'

Diviners can advise individuals to commission a miniature mask for preventative, protective, or curative purposes. Interestingly, some scholars have stated that although women do not ordinarily have access to masks, those from families that have a strong connection to a specific mask may commission these miniature versions as a means of retaining ties to their own family identity after they marry.

In addition to being the property of one single individual, in certain instances, miniature masks may also play a communal role in secret societies. They are among the sacred objects displayed at men's society meetings to protect the men collectively and can be shown to new initiates. On these occasions, they are interpreted to be representations of the benevolent spirits associated with the most important masquerades of the area. They are used as sacred objects for taking oaths and for swearing to tell the truth. The miniature masks are often attached to other powerful objects such as leather pouches or antelope horns filled with medicines. In this context, their backs can also be stuffed with magical potent ingredients.















## SNOW GOGGLES

LATE PUNUK/ EARLY THULE, ALASKA

Circa 1000 – 1200 AD

Marine ivory

Width: 7 in, 18 cm

### PROVENANCE

Collected at the village of Wales, Alaska

Jeffrey Myers, New York

Inuit goggles, known as snow goggles, are a fascinating example of indigenous innovation and adaptation to extreme environments. These goggles were developed by the Inuit peoples of the Arctic region to protect their eyes from snow blindness, a condition caused by the reflection of ultraviolet (‘UV’) rays off the snow, leading to temporary, painful vision loss. The roots of snow goggles have been traced back to the Old Bering Sea culture that existed on both sides of the Bering Strait. The tradition of using snow goggles was then passed down to the present-day Eskimos.

The Inuit have historically lived in some of the most extreme cold weather conditions on earth, where blinding snowstorms and the bright reflection of sunlight off the snow are common. To combat the risk of snow blindness, they ingeniously developed snow goggles. The primary purpose of these goggles was to reduce the amount of sunlight entering the eyes, thereby preventing the reflection of UV rays from causing damage. They achieved this through a narrow slit in the goggles, which limited the field of vision but significantly reduced the light intensity. This design not only protected against snow blindness but also improved visibility in bright, snowy environments by

reducing glare.

Traditionally, Inuit goggles were made from materials readily available in the Arctic environment. The most common material was bone or antler, though wood and even marine ivory were used as well. The material would be carved to fit the wearer’s face snugly, with a narrow slit for the eyes that allowed for limited but sufficient vision. The edges that contacted the face were often softened or lined with caribou fur to ensure a comfortable fit and to prevent the escape of body heat. They were then attached to the face using organic cords, made from caribou sinew for example.

The design of these goggles varied slightly from one region to another, reflecting the specific environmental conditions and the cultural practices of each Inuit community. Despite these variations, the fundamental concept remained the same: to protect the eyes from the sun’s reflections and to improve visibility in snowy conditions. An examination of snow goggle design elements used by various prehistoric Inuit cultures reveals several recurring design motifs, many of which are fairly consistent and common to specific, relatively short periods. In most Old Bering Sea designs, and occasionally in Ipiutak







examples, the engraved composition includes a pair of circular ‘eye’ design elements positioned below the actual functioning eye openings.

In a typical Ipiutak or Old Bering Sea engraved composition, animal-like ‘nostrils’ are often incorporated on or about the bridge of the nose.

While traditional materials like bone and antler are less commonly used today, the design principle of Inuit goggles has been adapted into modern eyewear used in snow sports and expeditions. Modern versions of snow goggles often incorporate advanced materials like plastics for the

frame and polarized lenses to reduce glare, but the essential design – a narrow opening to protect the eyes and reduce light entry – remains influenced by the traditional Inuit invention.

Inuit goggles are not just a testament to human ingenuity in adapting to harsh environments; they also highlight the sophisticated understanding the Inuit people had of their natural world and the challenges they faced. These goggles represent a remarkable blend of function, design, and cultural identity, offering insight into the relationship between humans and their environment.















## STANDING FIGURE MBULENGA

LULUA, DRC

Late 19th/early 20th century

Wood

Height: 18 ½ in, 47 cm

### PROVENANCE

Harvey Menist (1930–1982), Amsterdam, The Netherlands (acquired circa 1970).

Merton D. Simpson (1928–2013), New York City, NY, USA. Acquired pre-1983.

Private Collection, New York, acquired in 1986.

### PUBLICATION HISTORY

Gallery Menist Primitive Art Amsterdam, catalogue, n.d. (ca 1970)

Arts d'Afrique Noire, no.46, 1983 (advertisement Merton Simpson)

Arts d'Afrique Noire, INDEX, no.1-57, 1986: (advertisement Merton Simpson)

The Lulua people, who reside along the Lulua River valley in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, are distinctive for their extensive and intricate portrayal of scarification patterns. This is particularly notable because the tradition of scarification largely faded out in the 19th century among the Lulua people. These carvings often serve both spiritual and decorative roles, with the wood figures known for their refined artistry.

The Lulua people, historically, have engaged in wood carving to produce figures that carry weapons and shields, representing the ideal warrior, known as the *Mukalenga Wa Nkashaama*. These figures not only embody warrior virtues but also act as intermediaries between the living and the

dead, bridging natural and spiritual forces. Moreover, Lulua carvers crafted maternity figures to aid pregnant women, a tradition tied to the *Bwanga Bwa Cibola* society, and created protective figures for women and children, often depicted holding a cup. Aside from these spiritual and societal roles, prestige objects such as neck rests, whistles, and pipes, adorned with human figures, were reserved for village chiefs, indicating their high status within the community.

What sets Lulua carvings apart is not just their thematic significance but also their stylistic characteristics—complex scarifications, a typically pointed coiffure on figures, and the representation of societal roles through the carvings.

Emphasis was placed on cultural or 'human' beauty, that is, beauty created by human beings; scarification was one of the supreme expressions of this ideal. The notion of beauty and goodness was expressed through anatomy as well as scarification and other forms of skin beautification. Large heads and high foreheads were considered signs of beauty. Finally, much like the Luba-Katanga, the idealized beauty was also meant as an invitation to the ancestral spirits to inhabit the sculptures and use them as intermediaries between the natural and supernatural worlds.

Another characteristic of Lulua statuary is the hairstyle of one or more curved braids pointing upwards, usually one protruding from the crown of the cranium. Costa Petridis elucidates the meaning of the coiffures: 'In the Lulua context the fontanelles (soft spots of the cranium of an infant) signified double sight – that is clairvoyance and the ability to discern the invisible in the visible and the past and future in the present.'

This example on offer is particularly large and has an unusual prognathic jaw, bearing some similarities to an example sold at Sotheby's in December 2018 (lot 10) ex Marc Leo Felix collection.















## DREAM DANCE MASK

YU'PIK, KING ISLAND, ALASKA

Circa 1880's

Wood, pigments, string, feathers (replaced)

Height: 8 in, 20 cm

### PROVENANCE

Heye Foundation / Museum of the American Indian (collection number 10/6033), acquired in 1921.

Julius Carlebach (1909–1964), acquired in 1946.

Private Collection, New York

Eskimo shamans utilized masks in a rich and complex spiritual life. These masks were not only artistic expressions but also vital components in rituals and ceremonies bridging the human, animal, and spirit worlds. The diversity of Eskimo cultures, stretching from Siberia through Alaska, Northern Canada, to Greenland, is reflected in the varied use and significance of these masks. The term 'Eskimo' itself is complex in its acceptance, being preferred in some regions like Alaska for its collective reference to Yup'ik and Iñupiat (Inuit) heritage, as well as Siberian Yupik peoples.

Yup'ik masks were used in ceremonies to make the unseen spirit world visible, facilitating communication between humans, animals, and spirits. Shamans played a crucial role in this spiritual dialogue, wearing masks during rituals to invoke spirits for guidance or to exorcize evil ones causing illness. These ceremonies were central to reinforcing relationships between humans and their ancestors, the animals they depended on for sustenance, and the spiritual realm. The creation of masks was a communal effort, often guided by shamans, embodying the spirits that would assist in these rituals.

Inuit shamanism, as explored through the wisdom of the shaman Aua in discussions with explorer Knud Rasmussen, offers insights into Inuit beliefs about the soul, life, death, and the interconnectedness of all beings. Aua's teachings highlight the deep spiritual connections the Inuit have with their environment, emphasizing the role of shamans in navigating the challenges posed by the natural world and the spiritual realm. This spiritual guidance was essential for the community's survival and well-being, deeply rooted in respect for and understanding of the natural and spiritual worlds.

To the outsider, these masks appear otherworldly, dreamlike, and haunting, secreting unknowable mysteries. This interpretation parallels Yup'ik elders' statements that mask imagery was often generated out of someone's dreams. These were described to a skilled carver, who was asked to interpret them into a manifestation of a mask.

Interestingly, Yup'ik masks were almost always made in corresponding pairs, or multiples, so that the stories they narrated could develop complexity. When first collected, and taken out of context, this fact was often misunderstood, and early collectors thought of similar masks as duplicates rather than as unified partners.

This mask, with an articulated mouth and nine inset wood teeth, is painted with black, red, green, and blue pigments. Below the eyes are two large teardrop-shaped holes, representing nostrils. A similar mask, also ex Heye Foundation and now in the collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Art, is published in the catalog *Yua: Henri Matisse and the Inner Arctic Spirit*, (illus. p 37), a stunning exhibition of historic Alaskan Yup'ik masks and Matisse drawings influenced by them.















## PREGNANT FEMALE FIGURE

THULE CULTURE, ST LAWRENCE ISLAND

800–1200 AD

Marine ivory

Height: 2 in, 5 cm

### PROVENANCE

Excavated at the Kukuluk site, St Lawrence Island

Private collection, USA

For more than two thousand years, Alaskan Native people have fashioned human figurines out of stone, bone, walrus ivory, rodent claws, trade cloth, and many other materials. Children played with such figurines (usually called dolls) but their other uses in both every day and ceremonial life are less well known.

By far the largest number and oldest examples of human figurines from prehistoric Alaska (the Okvik period of Old Bering Sea cultures) have been excavated on and near St. Lawrence Island. Punuk sites from the nearby Punuk Islands yield figurines whose body styles are like those of the Old Bering Sea cultures. Thule human figurines,

unlike the preceding styles from the coast of Siberia and St. Lawrence Island, are found across the North American Arctic from the Bering Strait to Greenland.

This small doll, measuring two inches tall, is possibly the finest Thule figure extant. Excavated from an Alaskan site it is the only known example depicting a pregnant female. The doll is replete with a tall, conical coiffure typical of the period. The eyes, mouth, and umbilicus are indicated by small, round depressions. The actual purpose of this doll is unknown – perhaps it was a good luck amulet for a pregnant woman, was used for some didactic purpose, or was simply a child's toy.















## TWIN FIGURES *IBEJIS*

YORUBA, (ORO/OMU ARAN AREA), IGBOMINA  
NIGERIA

Late 19th/early 20th century

Wood, glass beads, metal

Height: 10 in, 25 cm

### PROVENANCE

Dr. Jeffrey Hammer (1941–2016). Dr. Hammer was a psychiatrist, scholar, and collector. He collected mostly Yoruba art and conducted field research in Nigeria from 1979 to 1982.

Private Collection, USA (acquired in the 1980s from Dr. Hammer) and thence by descent.

Yoruba peoples have one of the highest incidents of twin births in the world. As a result, twins are regarded as extraordinary beings protected by Shango, the deity of thunder. They are believed to be capable of bestowing immense wealth upon their families or misfortune to those who do not honor them. Powerful spirits in life, twins are honored with carved memorial figures when they die. These figures, known as *ere ibeji* (literally meaning *ere*: sacred image; *ibi*: born; *aji*: two), remain a point of access to the spirit of the departed individual. The mother provides ritual

care to the figures, bathing, dressing, adorning, and feeding them. Such daily handling is responsible for giving their surface its distinctive patina. *Ere ibeji* invariably represent their subjects with mature adult physiognomies and are often crowned with elaborate hairdos.

This fine pair on offer, coming from the renowned collection of Dr. Jeffery Hammer, is adorned with bead necklaces and metal bracelets and represents two female twins with large breasts, lobed coiffure, and facial features that have been smoothed by years of washing.























## FLUTE STOPPER

MIDDLE SEPIK RIVER, NEW GUINEA

19th century

Wood, fibers

Height: 10 in, 25 cm

### PROVENANCE

Private Collection, New York

The flute holds a significant place in the musical and cultural traditions of New Guinea, reflecting a rich tapestry of social, ceremonial, and spiritual life across the island's diverse communities. Flutes often serve more than a musical purpose; they are deeply embedded in the spiritual and communicative practices of various communities. In some cultures, within New Guinea, flutes are believed to carry voices of the ancestors or spirits, acting as a medium for communication between the spiritual and human worlds.

Flutes play a crucial role in various rituals, including initiation ceremonies, harvest festivals, and rites of passage. The sound of the flute can signify the presence of spirits, mark transitions in ceremonies, or invoke blessings for the community.

In certain societies, knowledge of flute construction, playing techniques, and the meanings of their sounds may be closely guarded by specific groups, often male elders or secret societies. The use of flutes can be restricted to these groups, serving as a tool for social regulation and the transmission of secret knowledge.

Flute stoppers are critical components of certain types of New Guinean flutes, used to modify the instrument's sound or for decorative purposes. These stoppers can be made from various materials, including wood, bamboo, clay, or bone, and are often intricately carved or decorated. Beyond their functional role in modifying the sound of the flute, stoppers often carry symbolic meanings. They may depict ancestors, spirits, totemic animals, or mythological figures, serving as a visual and spiritual link between the player, the community, and the supernatural realm.

The design and craftsmanship of flute stoppers reflect the artistic and cultural expressions of New Guinea's diverse communities. They are considered valuable art objects that showcase the skill and creativity of their makers, often passed down through generations as heirlooms.

This flute stopper is very old, likely dating to the 19th century, and is probably stone carved. It depicts an almost prehistoric-like bird perched on the head of a human. The stopper retains some of the original fiber that decorated the object. A small portion of the ear has been restored.























## POUNDER

CHUUK ISLAND, CAROLINE ISLANDS, MICRONESIA

19th century or earlier

Coral rock

Height: 6 ½ in, 16 ½ cm

### PROVENANCE

Private Collection, Berlin, Germany

Finely carved from a single piece of white sea coral, this pounder has an elegant form comprising a flat handle adorned by four equidistantly carved relief nipples and a tubular neck that broadens to a generous pounding surface. This pestle was intended for pulverizing edible roots and fruits, primarily breadfruit and taro root, into poi. The pounded substance was then blended with water into a highly nutritious paste.

Traditional calabash bowls were used as containers to

hold poi mixtures, and traveling royalty were accompanied by their own poi maker, with his or her own poi-making implements like this one. As there was a lack of stone on a Micronesian Coral Atoll, Kanakas used coral to create such pounders.

This pounder is in good condition with a smooth surface to base of pounder, indicating decades of use. Small loss to side of finial.















## CEREMONIAL BOOMERANG

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Late 19th/early 20th century

Mulga wood, remains of spinifex

Length: 40 in, 102 cm

### PROVENANCE

Private USA Collection

Boomerangs hold a significant place in the rich tapestry of Australian history, being one of the most iconic and enduring symbols of Aboriginal culture. Their origins trace back thousands of years, with archaeological discoveries suggesting their use in Australia for at least 10,000 years. Early examples were crafted from various materials, including wood, bone, and stone, evidencing the deep-rooted ingenuity and adaptability of Indigenous Australians. The traditional crafting of boomerangs was a skill passed down through generations, embodying the rich cultural heritage, knowledge, and spiritual beliefs of the people. Each boomerang was made to suit its specific purpose, from hunting and warfare to ceremonial use and musical instruments, showcasing the diverse utility of this remarkable tool.

The boomerang is renowned not just for its unique returning ability but also for its versatility. While the returning boomerang is widely recognized, it represents just one type of many in the Aboriginal arsenal, with most boomerangs designed for other purposes. Non-returning boomerangs, often larger and heavier, were primarily used for hunting, capable of delivering a lethal blow to animals such as kangaroos and birds, or in combat. The returning

varieties were typically used to flush game out of hiding or as decoys to mimic the flight of a bird, besides their more recreational or ceremonial uses.

Throughout history, the boomerang has also served as a powerful symbol of Aboriginal culture and resilience. In contemporary Australia, it represents a bridge between the ancient traditions of the Indigenous peoples and the modern nation's cultural identity. Boomerangs continue to be made using traditional methods, serving as a vital link to a cultural heritage that predates European settlement by tens of thousands of years. They are used in cultural ceremonies, educational programs, and by enthusiasts worldwide, celebrating the rich cultural practices and innovations of Australia's First Peoples.

This spectacular example is carved from mulga wood, a good hard wood used for making various implements such as digging sticks, woomeras, shields and wooden bowls. The boomerang has a highly abstract face in counter-relief as well as linear and meandering patterns throughout. Such an exceptional object may have had ceremonial use in addition to being a weapon. In overall good condition, small restoration to tip. Comes with a custom base.















## HELMET MASK

BASSA OR GOLA, LIBERIA

Early 20th century

Wood

Height: 16 in, 41 cm

### PROVENANCE

Constance McCormick Fearing (1926–2022), Montecito, California

This helmet mask evokes idealized feminine beauty and, like other masks of this type known as *soweï* developed in the region, would have been worn by leaders of the all-female society during the initiation of young women into adulthood. Within Mende and Sherbro cultures in Sierra Leone, or Bassa and Vai cultures from neighboring Liberia, helmet masks are carved with symbolic features that endow wearers with spiritual power. Senior members of the Sande initiation society may have worn this work in performances.

As a representation of the guardian spirit of Sande, a powerful pan-ethnic women's association responsible for education and moral development, the work alludes to an idealized female beauty. Worn at performances to celebrate the completion of the young initiates' training period, these masks are finely carved to convey admired feminine features: an elaborate coiffure, a smooth broad forehead, narrowly slit eyes, a small, composed mouth, and a ringed neck. The sides of the head have shell-like patterns.























## OVERMODELED SKULL RELIQUARY

IATMUL PEOPLE, MIDDLE SEPIK RIVER,  
PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Late 19th /early 20th century

Human skull and hair, pearl-shell, shell disk embedded in the earth mud on the side of the cheek, cane, sago palm pith, earth and pigments, wood and rattan armature.

Height: 60 in, 150 cm

### PROVENANCE

Germany missionary collection

Loed Van Bussel (1935–2018), Amsterdam

François Coppens Collection, Brussels

Alan Steele, acquired from the above

Private collection since 2012

The Iatmul people, indigenous to the Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea, have a rich tradition of using overmodeled skulls, which stand as a profound expression of their complex spiritual beliefs and social practices. This unique form of art involves the intricate process of decorating human skulls with clay, creating a lifelike representation of the deceased's face. The practice is deeply rooted in the Iatmul's ancestral worship and their belief in the cyclical nature of life and death, where the spirits of ancestors play a pivotal role in the daily life and well-being of the community.

The making of overmodeled skulls, a custom that has existed since the Neolithic era, is widespread in Oceania and the Near East. They were primarily used in various ceremonial contexts, serving as a tangible connection

between the living and the ancestors. They were believed to house the spirit of the deceased, thus maintaining a direct link to the ancestral world. This connection was essential for securing the ancestors' blessings, guidance, and protection. The skulls were often kept in men's houses or spirit houses, which were central to community rituals and gatherings, indicating the importance of ancestors in social and spiritual life. During specific ceremonies, these skulls were displayed and venerated, sometimes accompanied by offerings, to honor the ancestors and seek their favor.

The process of creating an overmodeled skull was not only a spiritual endeavor but also an artistic one, showcasing the skill and creativity of the Iatmul people. The clay used to cover the skulls was often molded to reconstruct the facial features of the deceased, sometimes painted and adorned with shells, feathers, and other materials to enhance their appearance. This act of adornment was not merely for aesthetic purposes but was imbued with symbolic meanings, reflecting the status, achievements, and characteristics of the person being memorialized. The use of overmodeled skulls by the Iatmul highlights a profound relationship with the afterlife, encapsulating their reverence for ancestors, the importance of memory and heritage, and a deep understanding of the cycle of life and death.

This example on offer is one of the finest extant examples, crafted with great sensitivity and beauty. Depicting the face of a young man, possibly killed in battle, the work is in excellent condition and still retains the original wood and rattan armature. The armature would have originally been festooned with feathers, leaves, flowers and various ornaments.























## GRADE SOCIETY FIGURE *MAGHE NE HIVIR*

AMBRYN ISLAND, VANUATU

First half 20th century

Fernwood, earth, remains of natural pigments

Height: 72 inches

### PROVENANCE

Lynda Cunningham (1943–2016), New York, acquired in the 1970's.

Private New York collector, acquired from the above in 1978.

Much of the art of central and northern Vanuatu in the southwest Pacific is associated with grade rituals, a hierarchical series of initiations, each of which confers successively greater religious and political authority during life and in the realm of the dead. In some areas, individuals who have reached the highest grades are considered the living dead, having already achieved the status of ancestors.

Men's and women's grade rituals exist in most areas, but sculpture is created almost exclusively for men's grade rites. This figure is carved from fern wood, the fibrous trunk of a tree fern composed of aerial roots surrounding a woody core. During the grade rites, grade figures are erected on the dancing ground and serve as temporary abode for the spirits associated with the grade. After the ceremony, the figure, its purpose served, is left on the dancing ground, its supernatural powers waning as it slowly disintegrates.

Collected soon after it was used, this retains portions of its original paint.

Crafted from the revered and locally sourced woods of the Ambryn forests, each piece bore the unique touch of its creator, making them as much a work of art as a spiritual artifact. The stylistic influences of the carvings, particularly the large eyes and nose, draw from the traditional beliefs that the eyes are windows to the soul and the nose a pathway to the breath of life, emphasizing the importance of wisdom, insight, and the life force. These artistic choices reflect the Ambryn's respect for the natural world, seeing the divine in every aspect of their environment. The carvings stand as a testament to the Ambryn's belief in the interconnectedness of all beings, serving as a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms, and as a cherished heritage of their enduring legacy.















## PENDANT WITH MALE PORTRAIT HEAD

AKYE (ATTIE), IVORY COAST

First half of the 20th century

Gold

Diameter: 2½ in, 6½ cm

### PROVENANCE

Roger Bédiat (1897–1958), Abidjan, Ivory Coast

Noir d'ivoire (Yasmina Chenoufi), Paris, France (2016)

### PUBLICATION HISTORY

Expo cat.: 'West African Gold Ornaments', Barcelona: Galeria David

Serra – Fine Tribal Art, 2022:81

For most Akan, gold is not just wealth. Gold is imbued with enormous spiritual value, especially within the ranks of leadership. Thus, while the economic function of gold among the Akan has diminished with its demonetization by the British colonial administration in the nineteenth century, gold has retained its fundamental significance in political regalia. Using modest technology—lost-wax casting and smithing—Akan craftspeople have fashioned intriguing and exquisite forms. The use of gold in leadership regalia is rooted in tradition, belief, and intrinsic worth, as is the use of its inferior relatives, silver and brass. It is, therefore, possible to differentiate among leaders—priests, political functionaries, lowly-ranked and paramount chiefs—simply based on the principal medium of the accoutrements.

Among the diverse kinds of gold jewelry featured in Akan chiefly dress are pendants of different sizes and shapes, including human, animal, and abstract designs. Today

these objects, cast by the lost-wax technique, are no longer a royal prerogative. They have been documented in the ornamentation of young women undergoing puberty rites and in the possession of persons of wealth and high status. Their current broad geographical distribution also suggests the influence of twentieth-century globalism. Indeed, gold pendants are no longer being manufactured exclusively for use in Africa but are made for sale in tourist shops and galleries, and for export.

The male human head on this pendant has an elaborate coiffure and similar male portrait heads are seen on Akye wooden combs. The male portrait head on this gold pendant might depict a respected leader, a revered ancestor, or a historical figure who holds significance within Akan society. These pendants could be worn as a symbol of status, lineage, or allegiance to a particular lineage or group within the Akan community.







## DIVINATION BOWL WITH FEMALE FIGURE *AGERE IFA*

YORUBA, NIGERIA

Early 20th century

Wood

Height: 7 in, 18 cm

### PROVENANCE

Lode van Rijn (1910–1997), Belgium and thence by descent

An Agere ifa (*àgéré Ifá*) is a holding receptacle, vessel or container for keeping and raising the sacred palm nuts or *ikin* used in Yoruba divination. Most Agere are made from wood, but occasionally also from ivory and coconut shells.

Given its ritual and aesthetic functions, *àgéré Ifá* provides the Yoruba carver with a unique opportunity to display his artistic talents. Usually measuring between five and sixteen inches in height, a typical container is in the form of an animal or human figure bearing a small bowl. In some cases, the metaphysical attribute of a given animal motif (such as a snake or mudfish) may be used to further empower the sacred palm nuts inside the bowl. But when the motif assumes a human form, it frequently has a votive significance, especially since some *àgéré Ifá* are given by clients to a diviner to thank *Òrúnmìlà* for a blessing or to implore the deity to bestow more favors on the donor.

This vessel, consisting of a kneeling priestess holding a bowl, served as a receptacle for a sacred palm nut (*ikin*). Through this medium, the Ifa priestesses made an offering to Eshu. In Yoruba culture, Eshu was considered a messenger between the gods and humans, delivering prayers and sacrifices to the heavens. He was a neutral force to human life, seeking to add balance. He protected travelers but also sparked arguments or misfortune among humans. This depiction of a woman bearing an offering in a devotional attitude conveys the notion that it was conceived of as a form of prayer to the divine.

This early example is exceptional for its small size and fine carving. The female figure has a conical coiffure and is wearing a beautiful necklace that resembles coral necklaces that represented royalty and prestige. The priestess also has a nose ring in her left nostril.















## CEREMONIAL SPOON WITH OTTER HEAD

IPIUTAK CULTURE, POINT SPENCER, SEWARD  
PENINSULA, ALASKA

100–600 AD

Caribou antler

Height: 6 in, 16 ½ cm

### PROVENANCE

Field collected, Jeff Myers

Private collection, USA

Ipiutak artifacts are amongst the rarest Alaska objects. Almost all Ipiutak material was recovered by museum-sponsored archaeological expeditions financed by the American Museum of Natural History in New York (Frederick G. Voss Anthropological and Archaeological Fund), by the University of Alaska at College, Alaska, and in part, during 1939, by the Danish National Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark. These expeditions removed over 10,000 artifacts from a site adjacent to Point Hope, where the Ipiutak culture thrived. The collection includes elaborate burial masks and carvings made from marine ivory, jet, and caribou antler.

The Ipiutak culture, a prehistoric civilization flourishing in Alaska around 100 to 600 CE, remains shrouded in mystery and admiration. Renowned for their intricate carvings and sophisticated artwork, the Ipiutak people have left behind a legacy that captivates historians and art enthusiasts alike. Their settlements, notably at Point Hope, provide a glimpse into a society that lived in harmony with the harsh Arctic environment, showcasing an extraordinary level of craftsmanship and spiritual depth.

Among the treasures of this ancient culture, the Ipiutak spoon with the head of a sea otter stands out as a masterpiece. This exquisite object is not merely a utensil but a symbol of the Ipiutak's deep connection with the natural world and their spiritual beliefs. Carved from caribou antler, this spoon embodies the stylistic conventions of the Ipiutak people, who excelled in creating objects that were both functional and profoundly symbolic. The depiction of the sea otter, an animal crucial to the Ipiutak's survival and spirituality, highlights their respect for the animals they depended on, as well as their keen observation of their natural surroundings.

The stylistic conventions of Ipiutak art are characterized by intricate detail, fluid lines, and a harmonious blend of realism and abstraction. The sea otter's representation on the spoon marries anatomical accuracy with stylized features, creating a piece that is both lifelike and emblematic. This balance reflects the Ipiutak's artistic vision, where the natural and spiritual worlds intertwine. Such pieces were likely used in rituals or as status symbols, indicating the owner's connection to the spiritual realm and mastery over the physical one.















## ENGRAVED BAG HANDLE

ALASKA

Mid-19th Century

Marine ivory

Length: 14 in, 36 cm

PROVENANCE:

Private USA collection

The use of engraving images in walrus ivory is a significant aspect of Indigenous Arctic cultures, particularly among the Inuit (commonly referred to historically as Eskimo, a term now considered outdated or offensive by some). This craft is part of a long-standing tradition that dates back thousands of years and serves not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a crucial element of cultural identity and survival.

The practice of engraving walrus ivory by the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic, including the Inuit, Yupik, and Aleut communities, is deeply rooted in their history. These engravings, known as scrimshaw in some contexts, often depict scenes from daily life, mythology, and the rich spiritual beliefs of these communities. The materials used, primarily walrus tusks, are readily available in the Arctic environment and have been utilized for both functional objects and ornate artworks.

The technique of engraving walrus ivory involves careful carving with sharp instruments, traditionally made from other bones or metals obtained through trade. The intricate details in these engravings require a high degree of skill and patience, reflecting the artisan's dedication and respect for their cultural heritage.

Themes commonly found in these engravings include

hunting scenes, depicting the deep relationship and reverence the Indigenous Arctic peoples have with the animals of their environment. Mythological creatures and stories are also popular subjects, illustrating the rich oral traditions passed down through generations. Additionally, patterns and symbols specific to the artist's community or family are often incorporated, adding a personal touch to each piece.

For the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic, engraving walrus ivory is more than an artistic endeavor; it is a vital aspect of their cultural identity and a means of preserving their heritage. These artworks serve as a bridge between past and present, allowing artists to maintain a connection with their ancestors while sharing their culture and stories with future generations.

Moreover, the creation and trade of engraved walrus ivory objects have historically been important for the economic well-being of these communities. In recent times, however, this practice has faced challenges due to global trade restrictions aimed at protecting walrus populations. Despite these obstacles, the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic continue to advocate for their right to sustainably use their traditional resources and maintain their cultural practices.

Engraving images in walrus ivory by the Indigenous Arctic peoples is a profound expression of cultural identity, historical continuity, and respect for the natural world. This art form embodies the resilience, creativity, and spiritual depth of the Inuit and other Indigenous Arctic communities, making it an invaluable aspect of humanity's cultural heritage.

This bag handle is profusely engraved on both sides and includes scenes of hunters, dwellings, caribou, foxes, otters, fish and insects – this work is an amazing visual depiction of life in the 19th century amongst the native inhabitants of Alaska.























## PRESTIGE AXE

SOTHO OR TSWANA, BOTSWANA / SOUTH AFRICA /  
LESOTHO

19th Century

Wood, iron

Height: 19 in, 48 cm

### PROVENANCE

Private Collection, USA

### PUBLICATION HISTORY

*100 African Blades*, Vol. 2, Ethan Rider (illustrated p 214)

This Sotho or Tswana prestige axe is one of the rarest types of axes from Southern Africa. Many seasoned African weapons collectors were skeptical of this piece when it was rediscovered in a small US auction. Subsequent research has revealed at least three other examples in major museums. The British Museum has an example (donated by the Wellcome Institute in 1954) with an unadorned handle. The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford also has an example (acquired from the Ipswich Museum in 1966 and attributed to the Bechuana people) and Brown University's Haffenreffer Museum has an almost identical example but with a flat butt as opposed to the more phallic example of this work (collected between 1889–1892 and misattributed as Congo). Their example was gifted by the Jenks Museum, a museum founded in 1871 as Brown's Museum of Natural History and Anthropology.

Whilst the precise attribution of this axe is not known (the *Mfecane*, a historical period of heightened military conflict and migration associated with state formation and expansion in Southern Africa lasting from the late eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, had caused widespread migrations and a resulting transfer of material culture influences throughout southern Africa) the striking shape of the blade bears a strong resemblance to the fantastic brass breast ornaments worn by high-ranking Sotho men in the 19th century. The top of the handle represents a highly abstracted head, and the butt of the handle is distinctly phallic-shaped, much like many Zulu spoons. An old collection number remains on the side of the handle.















## FEMALE FIGURE AKUABA

ASANTE, GHANA

First half 20th Century

Wood, glass beads

Height: 12 in, 30 cm

### PROVENANCE

Private Collection, UK

Disk-headed *akuaba* figures are perhaps one of the most iconic forms in the African figural corpus. They are ritually consecrated images that depict children and are carried by aspiring mothers who wish to overcome barrenness and conceive, aided by the power of community spirits. Their use arose out of an Akan legend about a woman named Akua who used such a figure for exactly this purpose. *Akuaba* ('Akua's child') are carried flat against the back, wrapped in skirts, exactly as a human child would be. After influencing a successful pregnancy, they are returned to shrines in testament to the spirits' power or kept by the family as a reminder of their child.

The fine *akuaba* shown here displays all the classic characteristics of its type, with a wide disk head, arched

eyebrows and nose in relief, horizontal arms, and a cylindrical torso. The flat surface of the facial disk, which suggests the flattening performed upon Akan children's foreheads by the gentle modeling of the infant's soft cranial bones, is carefully decorated with a group of lightly incised designs. A ridged neck, another Akan beauty ideal, communicates robust health. Small, close-set breasts identify the figure as female. This is in keeping with all genuine *akuaba*, girls being the preferred outcome for a birth in the matrilineal society of the Akan.

Holes pierced at the ends of the arms likely once held pendant beads or other adornments like the string of tiny beads that encircle the neck of the figure.















## STAFF WITH FEMALE FIGURE *TUMOGANI*

SENUFO, IVORY COAST

First half 20th Century

Copper alloy, iron

Height: 29 in, 74 cm

### PROVENANCE

Mamadi Sono, Abidjan, late 1970's

Michael Oliver, New York

*Tumogani* metal staffs appear during an elaborate Senufo ceremony called *Nuyo's* which celebrates the climactic finale of the intermediate grade of the *poro* society. The central performers of this ceremony are the four Master Singers who wear a fiber masquerade, and each holds one of these metal staffs called *tumogani* ('spirit figures in brass'). These staffs help the Master Singers produce songs that are 'clear as light', lucid, and illuminating. The staffs also refer to land spirits that can be malevolent and dangerous when crossed but also a source of inspiration for creativity and innovation.

The figure surmounting the staff represents a young, strong, beautiful woman just like those depicted on the wooden champion cultivators' staffs known as *tefalipitya*.











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